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Greuel presses aid for traffic  
Task force urged for road funds

By Lisa Mascaro

In seven years since the previous federal highway bill was passed, nearly half of the \$865 million allocated for special road projects statewide has not yet been spent.

Tangled by funding shortfalls, environmental and other hurdles, dozens of projects have yet to be completed - a situation that has prompted one Los Angeles official to try to ensure the windfall from this year's bill doesn't go unused.

City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel has called on city officials to come up with a strategy to guarantee that dozens of pet projects for the city in the massive \$286 billion highway bill signed by President George W. Bush this summer get built.

"Traffic is the No. 1 issue in Los Angeles, and we have to work smarter," the councilwoman said. "If these were priorities for us, let's move them. Let's get a task force that says transportation is important and let's find those dollars to get the city moving."

Transportation experts said projects statewide suffer because the money doled out by Congress is just a fraction of the full funding needed to turn the traffic improvements into reality.

While local officials celebrated the passage of the bill this summer - including \$625 million for Los Angeles County over the next four years - they nevertheless could be left scrambling in many cases to fill funding shortfalls.

"That is the biggest problem," said David Brewer, chief deputy director of the California Transportation Commission. "Just because you got an earmark doesn't mean you've got all the funds lined up for the project."

Agencies have to come up with matching funds and once the federal money does come in, it's typically 10 percent less than the amount authorized by Congress in the bill, officials said.

Already, the city's Department of Transportation has warned its planners to shave 10 percent off the amount promised in the new bill.

On top of that, the federal money is spread over the six-year life of the bills, which can delay big projects that often cannot complete construction contracts until all the money is assembled.

Experts said an obvious example of the shortfall in the new bill is the car-pool lane on the 405 Freeway, which received \$130 million toward the \$500 million cost estimate.

Even with an additional \$100 million in local matching funds for the project, officials still have a vast gap to fill.

"The 405 ... that's one big example. But it happens over and over again," Brewer said.

But **Mark Pisano, executive director at the Southern California Association of Governments**, believes the projects in this year's bill will have a better chance of getting built because they were already on agency wish lists.

"In the past we couldn't say that," he said. "It's a problem we have identified and that we raised in our consensus trips to our delegation. ... We brought more discipline."

"You're going to see we're going to spend the money a lot faster."

The previous highway bill, passed by Congress and signed into law in 1998, allocated \$865 million statewide for road and highway projects - special projects that congressional offices work to have included in the bill.

Years later, \$478 million - or 55 percent of the funds allocated - is getting spent. Those projects have assembled full funding and cleared environmental and other hurdles for construction to start, according to the state Department of Transportation.

That's 113 of the 160 road projects that were earmarked in the last federal bill, or about 70 percent, according to Caltrans, which administers the federal funds for local agencies that get the road projects built. Mass transit projects are administered separately.

In Los Angeles County, most of the three dozen highway projects under the last bill have been cleared for construction to start.

But even still, only 10 percent are completely built, 55 percent are in construction and 30 percent are not in construction - though those numbers could shift as paperwork catches up with jobs, Caltrans said.

Caltrans believes the stalled projects statewide will ultimately get built.

"The hurdles can be everything from environmental to (right-of-way) issues to insufficient funding to complete the project," said Caltrans spokeswoman Judy Gish. "Some projects are not completely funded."

Rep. Brad Sherman, who secured \$13 million for special street projects across the San Fernando Valley in the new bill, is confident all his projects would get built.

The Sherman Oaks Democrat, who said he worked in advance with local officials to carve out projects and ensure matching funds are available, noted that all but one of his earmarks from the last highway bill are finished.

"I'm confident all the small and medium-sized projects in the Valley, at least in the West Valley, will get built," said the congressman, who represents that area.

"The big issue for us now is the \$130 million for the 405. I'm not going to support anybody for governor that doesn't put the highest priority on the 405."

But the new bill brings substantially more earmarked projects - the Southern California region got its largest share ever of funds - and Greuel is pushing city officials to make sure L.A. projects don't lag.

The city finished virtually all of its projects from the last bill, but it has more than two dozen new ones to manage.

The city's Department of Transportation is expected to report back in coming weeks.

Most of the work, like street resurfacing across the Valley, will be able to get done year by year until the money is exhausted, city officials said.

But other projects, like a massive improvement for San Fernando Road near downtown L.A., received just a fraction of the total costs needed.

"Los Angeles desperately needs these dollars and we need to spend them efficiently and, most importantly, as expeditiously as possible," Greuel said.

Brewer said the California Transportation Commission will be grappling with these issues statewide as officials get a clearer picture of which projects will need extra funding.

He said the commission also will be looking into a provision of the new law that possibly allows funds to be loaned between projects to move them more swiftly.

"We're facing the same set of issues. I have hope that it won't be quite as bad because supposedly these projects were vetted better than before. That's what everyone's claiming. But who knows," he said.

"Sometimes I think it's just (a) wish on somebody's part. They think getting an earmark by a congressman is going to help make that happen."